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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TALLINN 000845

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TAGS: PREL PGOV RS EN

SUBJECT: ESTONAIN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS: NO LONGER HOT BUT
STILL POTATOES

REF: TALLINN 00347

Classified By: DCM Jeff Goldstein for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary. These days, progress in Estonian-Russian relations is measured in inches. Over the last several months, disagreements over sensitive and controversial issues such as the border treaty have not hindered cooperation on less hotly debated issues. However, Estonia's relationship with Russia remains highly vulnerable, particularly as Estonia enters a parliamentary election campaign early next year. End Summary.

We agree to disagree

¶2. (SBU) For several months now, the GOE and the GOR have managed to keep their disagreement over the border treaty on the back-burner and de-link it from other important priorities (e.g., transport infrastructure, environmental, and law enforcement cooperation). As MFA Third Political Department Director General Tiik told us, "It's still a potato, but it's no longer hot." Meanwhile, the MFA has continued its "baby steps" approach in confidence building with the Russians (reftel). According to Tiik, the Estonians' slow and modest efforts and increased direct contacts among counterparts have helped the sides to deal with contentious issues before they become too "hot".

¶3. (C) Although the GOR recently submitted a proposal to open new border talks, the GOE has made clear it has no desire to reopen the issue. On September 6 Karin Jaani, Director General for the MFA's Second Political Department and former Ambassador to Russia, told us, "The proposal wasn't new, it just removed the preamble they found offensive. With the Presidential elections taking place now and parliamentary elections early next year, it isn't the time to have these negotiations." Jaani continued that while the timing is curious, there has not been any follow up pressure or further statements from Moscow to resume talks. Vadim Vasiliev, Russian Embassy Political Officer, confided in us on September 5 that he believes the GOR proposal was intended to "test the water" and gauge the GOE's mood.

The Media takes a breather

¶4. (SBU) According to Andres Kasekamp, Director of the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute, in an August 24 meeting, even the Estonian press has recently become slightly less sensational in its coverage of Russia. Kasekamp explained that "Russia being Russia, the (Estonian) press not only gives it a lot of coverage but also sensationalizes any tension or conflict." In his

opinion, Kasekamp felt that the "straight" and "dull" reporting of Russia's new border treaty proposal, Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet's visit to Moscow on June 30, and Russian Transport Minister Igor Levitin's July 24 visit to Tallinn signified a positive step forward in improving the atmospherics. Even outgoing Russian Ambassador to Estonia, Konstantin Provalov, forecasted improved relations in an August 29 interview published by Molodyozh Estonii, a leading Russian-language daily in Estonia.

Back to basics

¶ 15. (SBU) Where Estonian-Russian relations have improved most visibly is at the technical/working level between Estonian and Russian law enforcement agencies (e.g., border guards, customs, and police). Martin Paas, Senior Customs Specialist, characterized his own cooperation and communication with Russian counterparts as "positive," despite recent delays at the border (para 7). (Note: in a meeting with Pol/Econ Chief, Enriko Aav, Director General of the Tax and Customs Board, also highlighted his office's good cooperation with Russia on the working level, but noted that senior level cooperation has been less effective due to changes of senior personnel on the Russian side. End note.) Even in sensitive areas like trafficking in persons (TIP), there has been more cooperation and information sharing recently. Kristiina Luht, Chief Specialist for the Ministry of Social Affairs, said that a roundtable discussion with Russian counterparts in St. Petersburg in June 2006, was the best cooperation she has experienced with Russian authorities to date.

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Flashpoints: present and future

¶ 16. (C) While bilateral relations have marginally improved, GOR and GOE officials have spoken to us of two possible issues that could rekindle recently dormant tensions.

Border Issues.

¶ 17. (SBU) From mid-July until early-September, the Russian-Estonian border near Narva saw a dramatic increase in traffic delays due to changes in inspection procedures by Russian border guards and customs agents. The resulting backlog of trucks caused discontent among truck drivers and businesses dependent on quick and reliable movement of goods across the border. There was significant press coverage of the problem with many GOE officials and politicians complaining publicly about the issue.

¶ 18. (C) The Russian Embassy's Vasiliev explained to us on Sep 8 that this clampdown was the result of efforts to combat corruption at the border. Vasiliev confided that Moscow disapproved of the "cozy relationship the customs and northwest border guard chiefs had with certain businesses." The GOE officially complained to the GOR and demanded to know when traffic will be eased. During a discussion with the MFA's Jaani, the Russian Embassy's Charge d'Affairs explicitly linked differences over the border treaty with the recent delays. Jaani, however, downplayed this conversation to us on Sep 6, noting she believes that the Russian Embassy was caught off guard and had not received proper instruction from Moscow. She also told us that in her opinion the Charge had most likely been speaking in a personal capacity. As of September 12, both the MFA and the Customs office told us that the backlog on the border has diminished.

Parliamentary Elections.

¶ 9. (C) There is concern within the MFA that in the run up to next spring's parliamentary elections, nationalist parties (Res Publica and Pro Patria in particular) will try to inflame anti-Russia sentiment in order to galvanize their base. September 22, the anniversary of the "liberation" of Tallinn by the Soviet Army, presents an early opportunity for nationalist groups to cause trouble. When asked about what may happen on September 7, Ott Lumi, Secretary General for Res Publica, said that officially he hoped that the day would pass without incident. However, speaking off the record he told us that "an incident would be extremely good for Res Publica's campaign and they would make good use of the publicity." Lumi said that Res Publica and Pro Patria's campaign will be on values, i.e. breaking completely with Estonia's Communist and Russian past.

¶ 9. (SBU) Comment. Until bigger issues, like the border treaty, are resolved, progress in other areas of the Estonian-Russian relationship will always be tenuous. Nevertheless, the fact that the two sides are not allowing their big disagreements to prevent progress in other areas is a welcome, albeit modest, step forward.

End Comment.

GOLDSTEIN